

WE LOVE OUR GUNS MORE

by John W. Bennison, Rel.D

www.wordsnways.com

Right: the commentator with his Christmas gift, circa 1956



When I was a child, I spoke like a child. I thought like a child, and acted like a child. I played cowboys and Indians, and cops and robbers. I had a cap pistol, a Fanner Fifty with real leather holster, and a lever-action, single shot Daisy BB gun. My father never hunted, nor took me hunting; and we had no firearms in our household. That was my experience growing up.

Admittedly, it was a very different than that of others I've known, respected, and for whom I have genuine affection. My friend Bob grew up in inner-city Detroit, where personal safety was an understandable concern, if not necessity. Jeff grew up in the rough and tumble rural West of Montana, where his most prized family heirlooms are the guns he inherited from his father. While I can understand and appreciate those very different experiences, the pressing issue of gun violence that grips our common life remains a shared responsibility for the common good.

As a boy, my fascination with guns did not follow me into adulthood. As a teen growing up and registering for the military draft in 1966, the American war in Southeast Asia was a stark reality. It was also the era when the devastating firepower of the M16 (AR-15) in the hands of an Army grunt left an indelible impression on many combatants, returning vets and those of us who opposed the war. I never carried a gun, or served in the military. Instead, I went to seminary. And, in many subsequent years of ministry I have only dealt with peripheral and potential gun violence.

I began my adult profession as a young cleric serving on the staff of a large, posh parish in an extremely safe and affluent suburban community; where it was the custom immediately following the blessing of the alms at the altar to have an armed security guard then accompany the ushers mid-service from the sanctuary to the church office across a quiet residential dead-end street. The ushers were excused from the remainder of the worship hour so they could tally the take.

Upon my arrival I voiced my surprise and objection with the church leadership, posing the possible scenario of an aged, pistol-wielding private security guard blasting away a would-be thief on the steps of the church. They reluctantly agreed it might reflect poorly on a house of prayer. But when the request was made of the wanna-be cop to serve without his sidearm he quit in protest. We do love our guns.

I went on to lead another parish for two-dozen years, where some local notoriety had preceded me. Years before my arrival the local police had confronted a transient on the church premises early one Sunday morning; and, when allegedly threatened, shot him dead. For decades afterward the larger community knew us as that church where someone was killed.

Then there was the parishioner who gave his wife a warning shot one night with a bullet hole in their bedroom wall when accused of infidelity.

Soon after another female parishioner came to me who was frightened by her spouse's violent temper, and mentioned he kept a pistol in their bedside table. I ordered her to retrieve it and bring it to me, which she did. I locked it up in my desk drawer of the church office, until the husband came and demanded its return. The wife later left him, taking the children with her. My last dealing with him was officiating over his funeral a few years later when, in his despondency, he committed suicide.

I would occasionally rail about the proliferation of all the guns in our society with which we collectively seemed so enthralled; but I knew I was a minority voice among my flock. I considered it a minor triumph when one of the pillars of the parish decided he no longer wanted the handgun he owned in his house. He brought it to me, and together we destroyed it.

The lack of reasonable restrictions we have when it comes to guns is rooted in their obvious appeal; leading to their preponderance in staggering numbers in a culture that allows utter unreasonableness to pose under the guise of “protection of freedom” and individual rights. Whatever interpretation one brings to the inherent vagueness of those twenty-seven words in the Second Amendment with regards to one’s right to bear arms, it is helpful to remember they are not carved in stone. That’s why it is called an amendment.

And like it or not, it may also be helpful to acknowledge the fact the avid sportsman, the inner-city gangbanger, the illegal trafficker on the black market, the law-abiding gun owner, and the lucrative gun and ammo industry share one thing in common. They love their guns. That’s why we will not simply legislate our way out of this one through reasonable debate, a half-baked compromise, or a better argument.

The comic Eddie Izzard has the sober one-liner: “Guns don’t kill people. But I think they help, don’t you?” Blaming the lack of stronger mental health policies where funding has been systematically slashed, or obscenely violent video games, or Hollywood blockbusters that pander to the gratuitous allure of blood and gore is – in the end -- all a smokescreen that attempts to obscure the obvious. We love our guns, and what they represent.

We love the cheap, readily available and disproportionate amount of personal power guns offer in the hands of everyone and anyone who wants it, for whatever reason. If one doubts that, just consider: The anticipated uphill battle to ban assault-style weapons and high-capacity magazines that might simply pose a reloading inconvenience to the next mass shooter and merely reduce – not eliminate – the casualty count is ludicrous in and of itself.

To the usual rebuttal stricter gun controls will not stop the crazed among us from obtaining their Bushmaster, their bullet-proof vests and ammunition stockpiles, I say it is a hollow, fallacious argument. But furthermore, I don’t care. We have erred so long on the side of doing nothing, might it not be time to err instead on the side of doing something; regardless of its possible ineffectiveness?

We have erred so long on the side of doing nothing, might it not be time to err instead on the side of doing something; regardless of its possible ineffectiveness?

As a society that claims to be civilized — but so distinctly different from our neighbors to the north, or the vast majority of so-called first-world nations, for instance — we are not. They regard us as barbaric, and they are right. But instead of a self-reflective examination as to why that is undeniably so, there is such a run on gun shows by fear-driven consumers to stockpile weapons and ammo, local police departments are having trouble keeping their firearms loaded and ready.

I write these comments on the one-month anniversary of the Newtown massacre, and a few days after Vice-President Biden convened the presidential commission on gun violence; attempting to engage all the presumed “stakeholders” in the renewed debate over gun control. Whether we have reached a tipping point with regard to the American public’s will to curtail our infatuation with guns remains to be seen.

The President has weighed in, even before his commission’s findings are released, stating, “If there’s a step we can take to save even one child we should take it.” But the ever-popular polls suggest the obvious step that could be undertaken will not prove persuasive. Too many minds will remain unchanged. Too many of us love our guns that much.

In his opening remarks at the beginning of those commission's hearings recently, Joe Biden refused to let us forget the carnage that horrified a nation only a month ago; wrought by a fellow American with a legally-owned and licensed assault weapon. Three times Biden repeated the word "riddled" to describe the stacked bodies of the Newtown first-graders; as if to indelibly stir the conscience of our nation's citizenry with a single image that should not only haunt us, but strengthen our resolve. For all of us who have heard the long-standing arguments and endless debate should know by now, one cannot change another's mind until there is first a change of heart.

In this society, it appears we still love our unrestricted right to own and carry a gun more than life itself. Bluntly put, we love our guns more than we love our children.

All of us who have heard the long-standing arguments and endless debate should know by now, one cannot change another's mind until there is first a change of heart.

© 2013 by John William Bennison, Rel.D. All rights reserved.

This article should only be used or reproduced with proper credit.

To read more commentaries by John Bennison, from the perspective of a progressive Christian, go to <http://wordsnways.com>